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ABSTRACT

A total of 334 certified school personnel from three school districts in the Mississippi Delta were surveyed regarding their attitudes toward special education and students receiving special education services. The overall attitude toward special education was moderately positive. Special education teachers and administrators had the most positive attitudes, whereas regular classroom teachers and vocational teachers had the least positive attitudes. Attitudes were positively correlated with experience in working with special education students only when special education teachers were included in the analysis. No relationships were found between attitudes and years of experience in schools or between attitudes and grade level taught. Several possible factors explaining regular education teachers' less positive attitudes are discussed. The study concludes that teacher preparation programs should require that regular teachers and special education teachers jointly participate in practica, thus providing all education majors with hands-on experience with special education students. For teachers already working in the classroom, seminars and/or inservice workshops should be provided to ensure that the needs of students with disabilities are addressed. (JDD)

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Attitudes of School Personnel Toward Special Education

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Abstract

Surveyed 334 certified school personnel regarding their attitudes toward special education and students receiving special education services. Special education teachers and administrators had the most positive attitudes, whereas regular classroom teachers and vocational teachers had the least positive attitudes. Attitudes were positively correlated with experience in working with special education students only when special education teachers were included in the analysis. No relationships were found between attitudes and years of experience in schools or grade level taught. Implications are discussed.

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Attitudes of School Personnel Toward Special Education

Referrals of most students with academic and/or behavioral problems for special education evaluations are mostly likely to come from classroom teachers (Salvia & Ysseldyke, 1991). In addition, the current emphasis of educating special students in the least restrictive environment insures that a regular classroom teacher is almost certain to have students with disabilities mainstreamed into his or her classroom at one time or another. Teachers knowledge of and attitudes toward special education and the students who qualify for special services will play a major role in the extent to which these students receive the services they require. That is, the knowledge and attitudes of regular classroom teachers toward special education should affect, positively or negatively, their willingness both to make referrals for special education evaluation and to make necessary classroom modifications for students with disabilities.

A recent study by Slate, Jones, and Hickin (1992) revealed that, even though mainstreaming has been around for roughly a quarter of a century, school personnel still lack knowledge of both Public Law 94-142 and Section 504 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act. Given this fact, the present study was conducted to determine the present status of school personnels' attitudes toward special education. The specific research questions addressed were: (1) What are the attitudes of school personnel toward special education and students who qualify for special services under PL 94-142 or Section 504? (2) How do these attitudes vary as a function of position, years of experience in

schools, and the number of students with disabilities with whom school personnel have worked?

Method

A 25-item questionnaire was completed by 334 school personnel from three school districts in the Mississippi Delta. The educators surveyed consisted of 187 regular classroom teachers, 26 special education teachers, 12 counselors, 12 vocational teachers, 13 administrators, and 84 others (e.g., aides in elementary and secondary schools). Participants' number of years in education ranged from 1 to 37 (M = 13.1, SD = 8.5). The were 72 educators who taught at the K-2nd grade level, 81 at the 3rd-6th grade level, 147 at the 7th-12th grade level, 29 taught across these grade levels, and 5 persons did not provide this information.

Following several demographic questions, respondents were asked to indicate their opinion regarding 25 statements on a 5-point Likert-type scale (i.e., strongly agree to strongly disagree). There were 21 positively phrased items and 4 negatively phrased items. The four negatively phrased items were reverse scored so that high scores indicated more positive attitudes toward special education and special education students than did low scores. The coefficient alpha for the attitude scale was +.87 which indicated a very high degree of internal consistency.

Results

The educators averaged 77.4 points (SD = 12.7) out of a possible total of 125 on the attitude scale (range 38 to 118).

The overall attitude toward special education was, therefore, moderately positive. The mean score for educators employed in each position are displayed in Table 1. An analysis of variance revealed that attitudes differed significantly as a function of position, $F(5, 239) = 19.253$, $p < .001$. TukeyB comparisons indicated that special education teachers ($M = 96.1$) expressed significantly more positive attitudes than did counselors ($M = 83.5$), others ($M = 77.4$), regular classroom teachers ($M = 74.3$), and vocational teachers ($M = 68.0$). The attitudes of administrators ($M = 92.0$) did not differ significantly from those of either special education teachers or counselors, but did differ significantly from vocational teachers, regular classroom teachers, and others.

Insert Table 1 about here

Questionnaire items and percent of respondents answering in a supportive manner are presented in Table 2. Note that only 11% had recently received training in the area of mental retardation and only 16% had recently received training in learning disabilities. Most (i.e., 75%) had consulted with a special education teacher about a student in their class.

Insert Table 2 about here

A correlation was found between attitudes expressed by subjects and the number of special education students with whom

subjects worked daily, $r(173)$ of +.30, $p < .001$, when all respondents were included in the analysis. This relationship disappeared, however, when special education teachers were removed from the analysis, $r(158) = -.06$. No relationship was present between attitudes and years of experience in schools, $r(224) = -.04$, or grade level, $F(2, 223) = 1.74$.

Discussion

The two groups that expressed the poorest attitudes toward special education and special education students were regular education and vocational education teachers. The finding regarding regular education teachers is troubling because these teachers must not only make referrals for special education evaluation but must also teach special students who are mainstreamed.

Several hypotheses may explain why regular education teachers expressed less positive attitudes. First, large classes make it hard to give specialized attention as needed. Students with special needs may require more individualized attention than a teacher is used to providing to most students and, thus, the student is perceived as disrupting the instructional procedures. In fact, more than half of the educators in this study (i.e., 53%) agreed that having a special student in the class was disruptive. Second, because of the focus on the least restrictive environment and inclusion, many students who formerly would have received services entirely or mostly in the special education classroom are now receiving services in the regular education classroom. This has occurred without teachers receiving appropriate training and

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coursework to deal with special needs students. In this sample, very few educators reported recent training in learning disabilities and in mental retardation even though special education teachers were included in this analysis. In addition, 54% of our subjects expressed a desire for additional training for working with students with disabilities. This is consistent with research by Middleton, Morsink, and Cohen (1979) who found that one of the most frequent complaints of regular classroom teachers concerning their responsibility toward special education students is the lack of skill specifically related to making modifications for such students.

Although initial analysis suggested that the more familiar an educator was with special students with special needs, the more positive his or her attitudes tended to be, this relationship disappeared when special education teachers were removed from the analysis. Luckner (1991) found that positive attitudes by educators toward mainstreaming were related to educators' perceived ability to make appropriate modifications for students with disabilities. Given the lack of training reported by teachers in our sample, the failure of contact to improve attitudes toward special students is, therefore, not surprising. If teachers' attitudes toward students with disabilities are to be improved, then additional training in working with special students must be provided. Teachers' professional organizations have long demanded (Middleton et al., 1979) this specialized training.

Although mainstreaming has been an emphasis in special education since 1975, our results indicate that many educators remain unconvinced of the appropriateness of mainstreaming. Only 47% of respondents agreed that special education students should be mainstreamed into regular classes, whereas 28% preferred that such students be instructed primarily in resource classrooms.

In conclusion, we believe more training is needed to help educators understand and adapt to the many needs of our special education students. Though most institutions of higher education are providing students with information about mainstreaming, few require that teacher education students have experience with students with special needs (Hoover, 1986). We think that teacher preparation programs should require that regular teachers and special education teachers jointly participate in practica, thus, providing all education majors with hands-on experience with special education students. For teachers already working in the classroom, seminars and/or inservice workshops need to be provided by school districts, state departments of education, or professional education organizations to ensure that the needs of students with disabilities are addressed.

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Table 1.

Mean Attitude Scores By Position.

Position	Mean
Special Education	96.1[a]
Administration	92.0[ab]
Counselor	83.5[bc]
Others (e.g., Aides)	77.4[cd]
Regular Classroom Teacher	74.3[d]
Vocational Teacher	68.0[d]

Note. Means with different superscripts are significantly different at the .05 level.

Table 2

Percentage of Respondents Expressing Positive Answers to Questionnaire Items.

Questionnaire Item	Percent Positive Attitude
Even though they may not be special education students, some students still require assistance/modifications to be successful at school.	93
I have consulted with the special education teacher regarding a special education student in my class.	75
For high school special education students, vocational preparation is very important.	75
Whenever a special education student's learning deficits influence his/her classroom success, I am required to make appropriate modifications in my teaching.	74
Education modifications that work with students with learning disabilities are different from those that work with average students.	68
I would like additional training/education in working with special education students.	54
The problem of special education students is a lack of motivation rather than a real disability.	51
When I have referred students for special education, my input has been solicited by persons conducting the evaluation.	50
Modifications in the regular classroom are required for students with disabilities such as diabetes and ADHD, or for conditions such as pregnancy when these problems interfere with students' education.	47
Having a special education student in my classroom is disruptive.	47
Special education children should be mainstreamed into regular education classes.	47

(table continues)

Questionnaire Item	Percent Positive Attitude
I have a good understanding of the special education process for obtaining assistance for students with learning problems.	43
When I have referred students for special education, I have been involved in the committee meeting regarding eligibility for special education.	43
I have been involved in the educational planning of special education students in my classroom.	43
I understand the meaning of my special education students' standardized test scores.	42
Standardized testing in the special education process is helpful in designing individual educational programs.	40
When their disabilities interfere with success in the classroom, special education students should have their grades modified.	34
I have had sufficient preparation for working with special education students in my classroom.	32
The special education teacher is responsible for modifications for special education students that are in my classroom.	28
Special education students should be served primarily through resource classes rather than in regular education classes.	28
Standardized testing in the special education process is helpful in describing students' special learning needs.	27
I have recently received training/education in the area of learning disabilities.	16
Education modifications that work with students with mental retardation are different from those that work with average students.	14
I have recently received training/education in the area of mental retardation.	11